INTRODUCTION

Librarians recovering our professional memory: enriching the past, present, and future

Michael A. Flannery, MA, MLS

See end of article for author's affiliation.

DOI: 10.3163/1536-5050.99.1.003

ORIGINS AND OPPORTUNITIES

This focus issue had its genesis in a white paper compiled by an ad hoc committee formed under the aegis of the Medical Library Association History of the Health Sciences Section, a summary of which appeared in the ''Comment and Opinion'' section of the *Journal of the Medical Library Association (JMLA)* last January [1].* While the details need not be recounted here, a few things were apparent to committee members in particular and the section constituency generally that are worth restating:

1. Interest in history and medical humanities has witnessed a steady decline, as seen in the content of the *JMLA*.
2. The cause of that decline resides not in editorial choice or preference but rather in the submissions offered, thus suggesting a more endemic shift in the profession away from historical interests and concerns.
3. A refocusing of attentions in these areas will provide new leadership opportunities for health sciences librarians in a wide range of areas.

ENSURING OUR FUTURE BY RECALLING OUR PAST

The present focus issue offers a corrective to items one and two, while perhaps suggesting some interesting directions for item three. Readers should find a surprisingly wide range of topics covered in this issue. Issues of privacy and legal compliance in the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) article by Wiener and Gilliland, Boyd's call for the collection and preservation of veterinary medicine's history, and initiatives and strategies to provide access to historical holdings while maintaining relevance in a clinical environment discussed by Welch, Hoffius, and Fox each speak to the need for librarians to work with their respective administrations in forming appropriate institutional commitments in furthering common goals and objectives. Heilemann's article on fetal and obstetric anatomy in the early modern period and Mix and Cameron's article on the digitization of the *Organon* show how important historical holdings still hold relevance for researchers and academicians today. Kapronczay, Magyar, and Putnam demonstrate that historical collections themselves evolve out of given political and cultural milieus and therefore provide valuable interdisciplinary insights into their specific developmental contexts. Lastly, Mages's article on the Bellevue classification system shows that efforts to categorize knowledge give important glimpses into the intellectual states of professions, in this case, nursing.

The sheer range of issues covered here show that history can be a powerful tool for librarians seeking to make meaningful contributions to the academy. From their promotional value in highlighting special institutional holdings to providing valuable curricular support beyond the immediate confines of the medical center, historical collections of all kinds—whether print materials, archival items, or museum objects—serve as resources for institutional prestige and educational enhancement. But the collections can only realize these benefits if librarians in the field consider them significant and integral to their professional mission. The articles in this issue speak to this mission.

Beyond collections, of course, is the profession itself. What about our own past? The development of medical librarianship, like *all* librarianship, has always been tied to its physical collections, but *librarians* have always defined them—by developing these collections, cataloging them, protecting and preserving them, and providing access to them—rather than be defined *by them*. Librarianship has always been an intellectual endeavor in its own right, of which historical research has been a significant part. We have perhaps no better example in our own specialty than Estelle Brodman, who had a master of library science and a doctoral degree in the history of medicine from Columbia University.

It is therefore not without some alarm that historical articles in the *JMLA* have witnessed a precipitous decline from a range of 18%–26% of the journal's content between 1937 to 1960 to a mere 3.6% from 1991 to 2007 [2]. What are we doing instead? According to Gore, Nordberg, Palmer, and Piorun, more than 80% of the *JMLA*'s content *now* consists of surveys (the vast majority in this group), bibliometric analyses, observations and descriptions, and experimental studies [3]. This is not to criticize any of these approaches; each can

* Jennifer Connor has brought to my attention a couple of corrections in reference to this ''Comment and Opinion'' article: George Milbry Gould was on the board of the Medical Library Association (MLA) but was not editor of the *Annals of Medical History*, a distinction belonging to the MLA's fifth president, George Dock. Also, Archibald Malloch was an editor of *Bibliotheca Osleriana* not the *Journal of the History of Medicine & Allied Sciences*, which was edited by John F. Fulton, also an MLA official. In any case, the essential point is not altered: MLA leadership also had strong connections with the historical community and historical scholarship. I thank Dr. Connor for her corrections and for the opportunity to make this important point a second time.

and does offer important perspectives on what the profession is doing and how well it is doing it. Nonetheless, this *does* give evidence of a narrowing—some might say myopic—view. How might a broader perspective be recaptured?

Perhaps this can be answered by way of an interesting historical example. More than twenty years ago, Luciano Canfora wrote a fascinating book, *The Vanished Library* [4], on the spectacular library at Alexandria. The significant thing about Canfora's history is that it focuses somewhat secondarily on the collection (by one estimate as high as 400,000 scrolls and 90,000 *amigeis*, single scrolls containing a complete work) and more on the librarians who managed it and the countless scholars they served and dialogued with. Demetrius, Neleus, Zenodotus of Ephesus, Apollonius, and Callimachus all organized and classified their materials, annotated them, and pursued their own collection development plans. *All* of these activities still need to be done today. While the Alexandrian library—that destroyed and now vanished library—was one of the ancient world's great achievements, it was so precisely *because* it was so well managed. As our libraries vanish—literally *deconstructing* before our very eyes!—we might do well to shift attention toward ourselves and the value-added services we can provide and less on the databases, full-text utilities, and assorted information gadgets as ends in themselves. Historical inquiry into our professional roles can certainly be an important means of doing this.

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF THE TECHNO-ZEITGIEST WITHOUT BECOMING NEO-LUDDITES

There is an implicit subtext that might as well be stated up front: that we have all become a bit too enamored of our gadgets and gadgetry—our scanners, our multifarious software packages, our browsers (*always* the latest and ''best''), our e-books and e-readers, our blogs, and so on. While we all need to be familiar with our tools and savvy about the market that provides them, to what extent do we risk enslavement to the reigning techno-zeitgeist in pursing it uncritically? We are cautioned of this by an unlikely source, the man who helped father virtual reality technology, Jaron Lanier. He is worth quoting at length:

> According to a new creed, we technologists [librarians too?] are turning ourselves, the planet, our species, everything, into computer peripherals attached to the great computing clouds. The news is no longer about us but about the big new computational object that is greater than us.
>
> The colleagues I disagree with often conceive our discussions as being a contest between a Luddite (who, me?) and the future. But there is more than one possible technological future, and the debate should be about how to best identify and act on whatever freedoms of choice we still have, not about who's the Luddite.
>
> Some people say that doubters of the one true path, like myself, are like the shriveled medieval church officials who fought against poor Johannes Gutenberg's press. We are accused of fearing change, just as the medieval church feared the printing press. (We might also be told that we are the sort who would have repressed Galileo or Darwin.)
>
> What these critics forget is that the printing presses in themselves provide no guarantee of an enlightened outcome. People, not machines, made the Renaissance. The printing that takes place in North Korea today, for instance, is nothing more than propaganda for a personality cult. What is important about printing presses is not the mechanism, but the authors….
>
> The ethereal, digital replacement technology for the printing press happens to have come of age in a time when the unfortunate ideology I'm criticizing dominates technological culture. Authorship—the very idea of the individual point of view—is not a priority of the new ideology.
>
> The digital flattening of expression into a global mush is not presently enforced from the top down, as it is in the case of a North Korean printing press. Instead, the design of software builds the ideology into actions that are the easiest to perform on the software designs that are becoming ubiquitous. It is true that by using these tools, individuals can author books or blogs or whatever, but people are encouraged by the economics of free content, crowd dynamics, and lord aggregators to serve up fragments instead of considered whole expressions or arguments. The efforts of authors are appreciated in a manner that erases the boundaries between them….
>
> If a church or government were doing these things, it would feel authoritarian, but when technologies are the culprits, we seem hip, fresh, and inventive. People will accept ideas presented in technological form that would be abhorrent in any other form. It is utterly strange to hear my many old friends in the world of digital culture claim to be the true sons of the Renaissance without realizing that using computers to reduce individual expression is a primitive, retrograde activity, no matter how sophisticated your tools are. [5]

To avoid complicity in this kind of totalitarianism, no matter how unintentional, these new technologies should offer librarians new opportunities to refocus and reassess our roles. It is indeed, as Lanier points out, not a question of these technologies per se, but rather of providing ''enlightened outcomes'' *through* them. An important way to do this is to recapture our sense of the past and in so doing, we will rediscover *ourselves*. Technology is inherently depersonalizing, but history and historical inquiry, while it can be about things, is primarily about *people*. Like Canfora's *Vanished Library*, our vanishing library is in the final analysis about *librarians*. History and the humanities—it is not called *human*ities for nothing—can help us restore ourselves to a position less defined by brick, mortar, paper, glue, or digital bytes and more to the prestigious role the Ptolemies had assigned to the position of librarian: the purveyors of information through informing its content, protecting its integrity, and maintaining its quality.

The articles presented here are narratives not of gadgetry but of how professional librarians interface with information, however construed. It is precisely the boundaries of authorship, media, and access that we continue to manage. This historical focus issue demonstrates that we are most assuredly present in our past and, if Lanier has his way, will continue to be

in whatever that future ''library'' might be called. This is something that our forward- and backward-looking profession should smile on from *both* sides of that space-time continuum.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The author thanks the members of the Advocacy Committee: Edwin Holtum, University of Iowa; Suzanne Porter, AHIP, Duke University; and Lucretia W. McClure AHIP, FMLA (chair), Harvard University. He also thanks Editor Susan Starr for her interest and support by suggesting the history focus issue and the opportunity to help in its fruition.

REFERENCES

1. Flannery MA. Advocating for history and the health sciences libraries and librarians: a position paper by the History of the Health Sciences Section, Medical Library Association [comment and opinion]. J Med Libr Assoc. 2010 Jan;98(1):9–11. DOI: 10.3163/1536-5050.98.1.006.
2. History of the Health Sciences Section. Advancing the history of the health sciences libraries and librarians: a report and reaction. Presented at: MLA '10, 110th Annual Meeting of the Medical Library Association; Washington, DC; May 24, 2010.
3. Gore SA, Nordberg JM, Palmer LA, Piorun ME. Trends in health sciences library and information science research: an analysis of research publications in the Bulletin of the Medical Library Association and Journal of the Medical Library Association from 1991 to 2007. J Med Libr Assoc. 2009 Jul;97(3):207. table 3. DOI: 10.3163/1536-5050.97.3.009.
4. Canfora L. The vanished library: a wonder of the ancient world. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press; 1987.
5. Lanier J. You are not a gadget: a manifesto. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf; 2010. p. 45–7, 48.

AUTHOR'S AFFILIATION

Michael A. Flannery, MA, MLS, flannery@uab.edu, Associate Director for Historical Collections, Lister Hill Library of the Health Sciences, University of Alabama at Birmingham, 1530 Third Avenue South, Birmingham, AL 35294-0013

Received August 2010; accepted August 2010